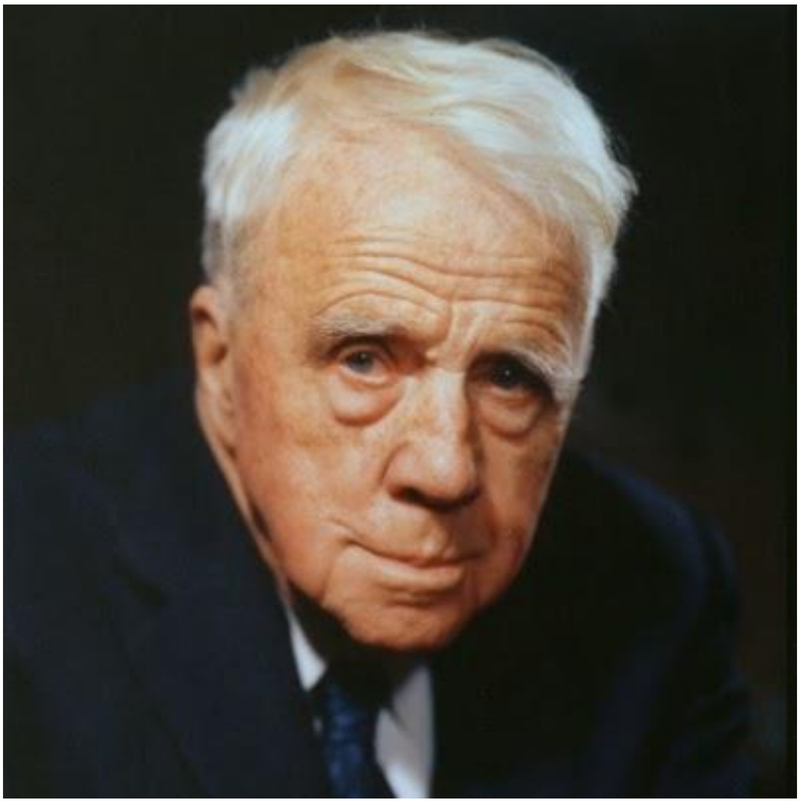
Famous American Poet

Robert Frost

biography



(1874-1963)

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was an American poet famous for his mastery of depicting rural life and endowing it with symbolic significance relevant to the human condition. Despite the lack of recognition and fame in early adulthood, Frost continued to write poetry and eventually became America's most decorated poet. He was awarded four Pulitzer Prizes and the Congressional Gold Medal for his poetry.

Birth:	**26th March 1874**
Death:	29th January 1963
Father:	William Prescott Frost Jr.
Mother:	Isabelle Moodie
Spouse/Partners:	Elinor Frost (m. 1895-1938)
Children:	6
Famous Works:	• *'Mending Wall'* • *'Fire and Ice'* • *'Out, Out'* • *'The Road Not Taken'* • *'After Apple-Picking'*
Nationality:	• American
Literary Period:	Modernism

Robert Frost's childhood

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco in 1874 to William Prescott Frost Jr. and Isabelle Moodie. His father worked as a teacher and journalist but tragically died from tuberculosis when Frost was only eleven years old. After his father's death, Robert Frost moved with his family to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where he was supported by his grandparents.

Frost developed an interest in writing and reading poetry during his time in high school, publishing poetry in the school magazine. Frost graduated from high school at the top of his class and delivered the valedictory ceremony alongside Elinor White, who would later become his wife.

In 1892 Frost enrolled at Dartmouth College for a short time. He also attended Harvard University from 1897 to 1889, though he never managed to graduate due to illness.

Robert Frost's adulthood

After leaving school, Frost tried his hand at different occupations, including working as a teacher, a factory employee, and editor of the Lawrence Sentinel. His experience working different jobs made him realise his desire to write poetry and attempt to earn a living from it.

Frost's first published poem, titled 'My Butterfly: An Elegy', appeared in the Independent newspaper in 1894. Shortly after in 1895, Frost married Elinor White after she had graduated from St. Lawrence University. The couple moved to New Hampshire, where they lived on a farm purchased for them by Frost's grandfather.

Frost worked on the farm while also writing a lot of his poetry that would later gain popularity. His efforts at farming proved to be fruitless, so he taught at an academy from 1906 to 1911.

Feeling relatively unfulfilled with his work, Frost made the brave decision to sail to Great Britain along with his family in 1912. His time in Britain led him to meet fellow poets such as Edward Thomas, Robert Graves, and Ezra Pound. The newly gained friendships aided him in promoting and publishing his work and were also influential on his poetic style.

In 1913 Frost published his first poetry collection titled 'A Boy's Will', and his second collection was published a year later, titled 'North of Boston' (1914). Frost's name gradually became relevant amongst readers in Britain, and his fame would quickly spread back home in America as well.

Life after fame

Upon news of the outbreak of World War I, Frost and his family returned to the United States in 1915. American publishers and writers took notice of Frost's uncanny poetic ability and his reputation soon became established in America. New publications of 'North of Boston' and 'A Boy's Will' for the US market became best-sellers, which led to Frost becoming one of the most celebrated poets in America.

Frost settled down on his farm in New Hampshire and took on a role as a teacher at Amherst College. He continued to write poetry and further cemented his position among the finest poets of America. Some of the collections he published include 'Mountain Interval' (1916), 'New Hampshire' (1923), and 'Steeple Bush '(1947).

Frost was honoured with four Pulitzer prizes for his poetry throughout his career. He also served as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress from 1958 to 1959, and in 1962 he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

Frost continued to teach at different schools such as Middlebury College, the University of Michigan, and Amherst College. He played a significant role in how the writing programs were set at the schools. Although he never

graduated from Harvard, he did receive an honorary degree. In fact, Frost was presented with over forty honorary degrees, many of which were from the world's most prestigious universities.

Towards the end of his life, Frost was chosen to deliver a poem at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. At the ceremony, he recited his poem 'The Gift Outright.'

Robert Frost died in Boston at 88 years old on 29 January 1963 and was buried in Bennington, Vermont.

Robert Frost's literary style

Robert Frost's poetry is primarily known for its eloquent descriptions of nature and rural life in New England. He held traditional poetic forms in high regard and pursued mastery of them throughout his literary career. Frost's ability to question universal aspects of the human condition with the use of colloquial language meant his poetry was accessible and engaging for both the casual reader and literary experts.

Robert Frost's literary style

Robert Frost's poetry has a clear conversational rhythm that's created by his use of meter and rhyme in his sentences.

Frost commonly used traditional stanzas and metrical lines in his poems. He favoured simple rhyme schemes such as ABAB (alternating rhyme) and AABB (Coupled rhyme). His most common stanza is the quatrain (four lines).

Frost was a proponent of blank verse and used the form with success in many of his poems. Some of his most notable poems written in blank verse include Mending Wall (1914), Out, Out (1916), and Birches (1916).

Frost discovered that the restrictions of writing within a set poetic form helped him focus on the content of the poem and took away the anxiety of having to learn and use ever-changing modern forms.

Robert Frost and literary movements

Robert Frost is more generally known for being a modernist poet.

The literary movement that Frost's work represents is a topic that's frequently debated among scholars. Frost stood separate from the poetic fashions of his day and chose to write on universal themes with a simple and direct style.

Although his career took place during the modern period, Frost's critics make the claim that his work was somewhat stuck in the past and possess characteristics of 19th-century American poetry due to his reluctance to experiment with new poetic forms and a distinct lack of references to modern technology.

On the other hand, it could be said Frost managed to implement 19th-century techniques in a way that was palatable for the modern reader. Frost created powerful imagery and symbolism through rural settings that showed originality and a sincere tone.

Throughout his career, Frost successfully married poetic forms of the past and present to create a distinctive and unique style that has established his position as one of the best poets of his generation.

Common themes in Robert Frost's poetry

The most important themes that appear in Frost's poetry are nature, loneliness, and duty.

Nature

Robert Frost's love of nature stands out in the majority of his poems. He depicts pastoral settings and draws profound metaphors and symbolism from his environment. His work reveals the extreme ends of the natural world; its beauty and grace as well as its destructive and omnipotent qualities are laid out in his poetry.

It's no doubt that the source of Frost's view of nature comes from the time he spent in the rural parts of New England.

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired. God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.

'A Leaf-treader' (1930)

Frost's notable poems that heavily reference nature include 'A Leaf-treader' (1930), 'Birches' (1916), and 'The Road Not Taken' (1916).

Loneliness

Frost expresses the theme of loneliness through the many different characters that appear in his poems. On the surface, the characters often live seemingly normal and mundane lives, but their sense of isolation is understood from their individual perspective of life and the realisation that nobody else sees the world exactly as they do.

But church-bells open on the blast

Our loneliness, so long and vast.

'Loneliness' (1916)

A good example of a poem with the theme of loneliness is 'The Lockless Door' (1923), 'Apple-Picking' (1914), and 'Loneliness' (1916).

Duty

Life in the countryside is endowed with a sense of hard work and duty, which is developed from the tough manual labour necessary for day-to-day life. Frost highly valued the inherent sense of duty in people and made it a theme of a number of his poems.

In the poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' (1923), the speaker is roaming the snow-covered woods and marvels at its beauty. He desires to stay and bask in the scene but comes to terms with the fact that he’s obligated to certain duties, and leaves the forest.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1923)'

Robert Frost's notable poems

Frost's most well-known poems are 'The Road Not Taken', 'Mending Wall', 'Out, Out', and 'Fire and Ice'.

'The Road Not Taken' (1916)

Robert Frost published 'The Road Not Taken' after his brief move to England. It was inspired by the countryside walks he took with his friend and fellow poet Edward Thomas. It’s perhaps his most famous and most misunderstood poem.

The narrative of the poem follows the speaker as he comes across a diverging path and his subsequent deliberation over which path he should

take. The main themes of the poem are choice and uncertainty, which are explored with the metaphor of the diverging paths.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

'Mending Wall' (1914)

'Mending Wall' is a poem that was published in Robert Frost's second collection of poetry, North of Boston (1914). The poem narrates the story of the speaker and his neighbour as they meet to rebuild their wall after a harsh winter. Despite having seemingly opposite world views the pair co-operate to mend their shared wall.

'Mending Wall' is a complex poem and its meaning is difficult to pin down. The main theme that Frost elaborates on is boundaries and their importance in human relationships as well as literally in the form of walls.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulders in the sun;

'Fire and Ice' (1920)

Robert Frost published his poem 'Fire and Ice' in his fourth poetry collection titled New Hampshire (1923). It's a short poem made up of a single stanza with 9 lines and a simple rhyme scheme. The poem presents fire and ice to represent the human emotions of desire and hate and discusses which of these forces would bring an end to the world.

The main source of inspiration for the poem is likely to be from Dante’s 'Inferno', which is a section of the epic poem Divine Comedy (1320) that describes a soul’s journey through hell.

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.